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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [SOCI](#) [SCUL](#) [KIRF](#) [UP](#)
SUBJECT: UKRAINE: GOVERNMENT'S POINT MAN ON RELIGION OFFERS
RESIGNATION

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Classified By: Political Counselor Aubrey Carlson for reasons 1.4 (b) a
nd (d).

Summary

1. (SBU) The Ukrainian government's point man on religious issues, the State Department for Religious Issues (SDRI) chief Ihor Bondarchuk, told us June 1 that, for a variety of reasons, he had tendered his resignation. Bondarchuk criticized the Yushchenko administration's "unprofessional" handling of religious matters and lamented his department's lack of authority and chronic underfunding. He asserted that Yushchenko's well-intentioned April 2005 decision to abolish the Soviet-legacy State Committee for Religious Affairs had, in retrospect, been a mistake. With no oversight from Kiev, local politicians were in many cases bowing to the wishes of their constituents and protecting the interests of the dominant local religious organization -- to the detriment of other religious groups. The SDRI, Bondarchuk complained, was powerless to intervene. On broader religious freedom issues within Ukrainian society, Bondarchuk related that his office had received many complaints about the haphazard implementation of ethics courses in Ukrainian schools. He also disputed assertions that anti-Semitism was rising in Ukraine, noting that the country's Jewish community was in the midst of a post-independence renaissance; anti-Semitism in France, he argued, was far worse than in Ukraine. End summary.

"Get Somebody Else"

2. (SBU) During a June 1 meeting, the director of the State Department for Religious Issues (SDRI), Ihor Bondarchuk, told us that he had tendered his resignation to Prime Minister Yuriy Yekhanurov. Bondarchuk blasted the Ministry of Justice and the Presidential Secretariat for handling religious issues in an "unprofessional way," complained that his department was chronically underfunded and essentially powerless, and said he was "tired of being personally criticized" by senior government colleagues for attending services in a parish of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP). Bondarchuk said he had told Yekhanurov to "get somebody else."

"A Big Mistake"

3. (SBU) Bondarchuk asserted that President Yushchenko's April 2005 decision to abolish the State Committee on Religious Affairs (SCRA) and replace it with the SDRI had turned out to be "a big mistake." Yushchenko's move had been well-intentioned; the SCRA was a deeply corrupt Soviet-legacy organization whose abolition was largely welcomed by

Ukrainian religious organizations. The problem, Bondarchuk explained, was that the SDRI was placed under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice and given no power over religious matters in the regions. Local-level Departments for Religious Issues (DRI) now answered directly to governors and mayors -- and no longer to Kiev.

"Lie to My Face and Laugh behind My Back"

14. (SBU) The results, Bondarchuk sighed, were predictable: local politicians, bowing to the wishes of their constituents, had generally protected the interests of the dominant local religious organization to the detriment of others, especially minority groups. When pressed for examples, he related that a UOC-Kiev Patriarchate priest headed the DRI in western Ukraine's Rivne Oblast, and had authorized the illegal seizure of UOC-MP churches in Ostroh (reftel) and elsewhere. Conversely, in the major eastern Ukrainian city of Kharkiv, where the UOC-MP was strong, the local mayor and DRI chief had publicly said they would "speak about religious matters only with the UOC-MP and provide land plots for the construction of churches only to the UOC-MP." While Yushchenko spoke eloquently in Kiev about religious freedom and tolerance, inter-confessional tensions in the regions were actually worsening, Bondarchuk claimed. "It reminds me of the first year of Perestroika in Ukraine," Bondarchuk grimly joked, during which "local Communist Party chiefs would report to Comrade Gorbachev that they had 'successfully implemented' Perestroika and that all was well."

15. (SBU) Throwing his hands in the air for emphasis, Bondarchuk claimed he was "powerless" to curb the excesses of local officials. He related that he recently attempted to

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mediate a dispute in Zhytomyr Oblast in which the oblast government was refusing to register a parish of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (ROCA). Bondarchuk said that the Zhytomyr DRI chief "lied to my face" about the matter and then "laughed at me behind my back" because the DRI chief "knows that I have no authority to make him comply with the law." Bondarchuk related that he had submitted a proposal to Yekhanurov to place the SDRI under the prime minister's authority and give it power over local DRI offices; the proposal had been actively opposed by the Ministry of Justice and the Presidential Secretariat and "went nowhere."

Complaints about Christian Ethics Courses

16. (SBU) Turning to broader religious freedom issues within Ukrainian society, Bondarchuk said that his office had received "a lot of complaints" about haphazard implementation of ethics courses in schools. In some schools, which he said were in eastern Ukraine but did not further identify, Bondarchuk asserted that young children "studied Marxism at 1 p.m. and then the fundamentals of Christianity at 4 p.m."; the kids were "confused," and their parents were "really angry." Bondarchuk cited Kharkiv for "getting things right" by allowing parents to have the final say on whether or not their children attended ethics classes.

Anti-Semitism: France is "Far Worse"

17. (SBU) Bondarchuk disputed the assertion of some members of Ukraine's Jewish community that anti-Semitism was on the rise. Noting that the SDRI had "excellent" relations with the leaders of all major Ukrainian Jewish organizations, Bondarchuk stressed that Jewish life was continuing its strong post-independence renaissance. While acknowledging that "in a nation of 47 million people, there are some anti-Semites," Bondarchuk claimed that anti-Semitism was a far greater problem in France than in Ukraine "despite the fact that France is a wealthy democracy with a strong legal

system."

Comment

18. (C) If his resignation is accepted, we will miss Bondarchuk as an interlocutor. He has been accessible, candid, and technology-friendly, overseeing the creation of an SDRI web site praised by religious organizations of many faiths. Bondarchuk's characterization of Yushchenko's decision to abolish the SCRA is one increasingly shared by religious organizations here, especially minority ones like the Mormons and charismatic evangelical Protestants, who depended on the SCRA to mediate disputes at the local level. Gwaltney